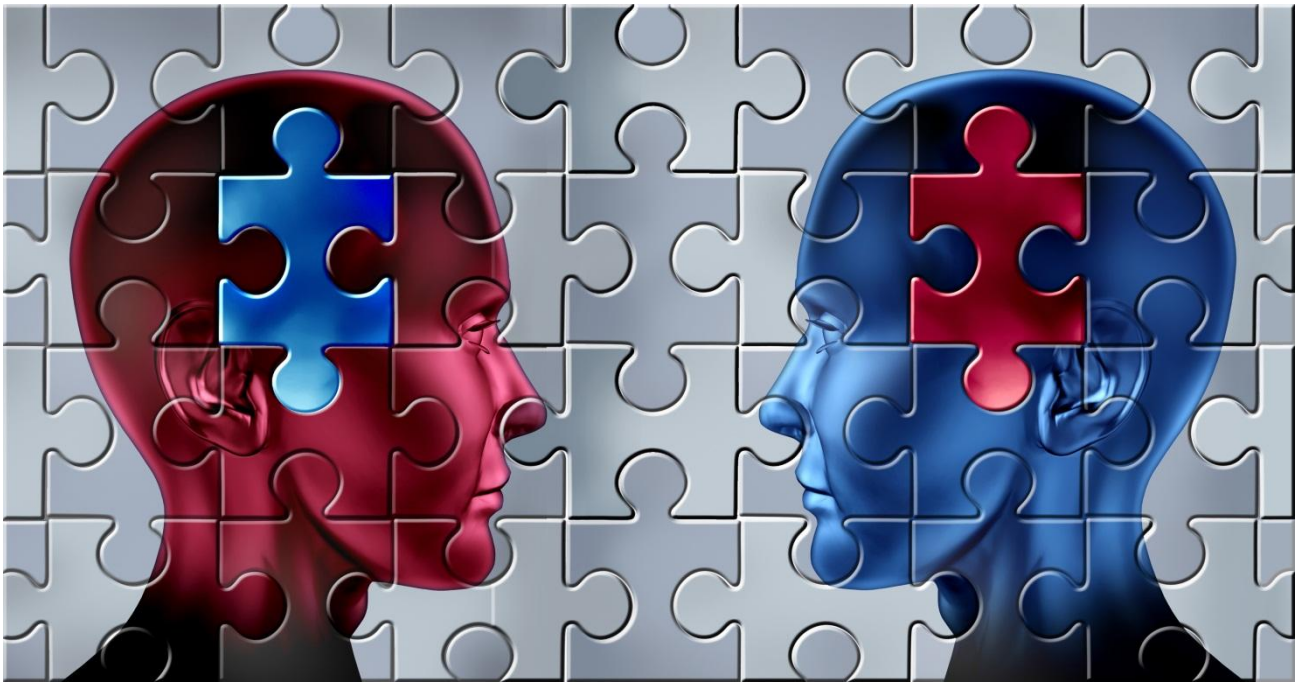

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Literature and Conflict: One-Day Postgraduate Conference at the University of Birmingham

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Abstract

The inaugural one-day postgraduate conference hosted by the School of English, Drama, American and Canadian Studies at the University of Birmingham on June 20th 2014, invited postgraduate students and academic researchers to explore the multiple relations and interactions between literature and conflict. Three plenary speakers from institutions across the country, as well as three panels of postgraduate students from the University of Birmingham, gave papers which examined such diverse topics as the issues and debates around the textual representation of violent conflict and war, literature as an expression of personal inner conflict, and audience responses to theatrical violence. Papers and subsequent discussions raised multiple interesting questions about literature and conflict, prompting a re-evaluation of both terms.

Keywords: literature; conflict; war; violence; representation; text

Literary texts and their creators, from the classical Greek epic to the twenty-first century novel, have attempted in multiple and wide-ranging ways to engage with (and in) conflict. The inaugural one-day postgraduate conference hosted by the School of English, Drama, American and Canadian Studies (EDACS) at the University of Birmingham on June 20th 2014 explored the diverse interactions between conflict and the written word, bringing together more than thirty postgraduate students, researchers, and academics. Three plenary speakers, along with three panels of postgraduate students from the University of Birmingham, at both Masters and Doctoral level, spoke on texts and topics from a wide spectrum of genres and historical periods, and asked the audience to rethink their definitions of the terms 'literature' and 'conflict'.

Motivated by the centenary of the First World War, the other organisers and I were initially interested in the extent to which literature is able to effectively represent war and other violent conflicts. This question has sparked a great deal of debate in literary and cultural criticism: how can the impulse towards an artistic response to conflict be reconciled with the fear that the violence and horror of war cannot be truthfully represented in traditional literary forms? This tension between conflicts and their literary representations, as pointed to by Theodore Adorno's famously controversial phrase, 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1981: 34), is perhaps due for reconsideration in a Western, media-driven society, in which war and violence are everyday presences on our television and computer screens. A number of our speakers explored issues around representation, including plenary speakers Dr Jarad Jon Zimbler (University of Birmingham) who discussed the success and failure of literary representations of apartheid, and Dr Natasha Alden (University of Aberystwyth), who focussed on a second generation fictional response to the First World War.

The first of our three plenary speakers, Zimbler, opened the conference with a paper titled 'J.M. Coetzee and the Truths of Colonial Violence.' Via a discussion of Coetzee's novels, written during the height of apartheid in South Africa, Zimbler explored the power that literary art has to express the 'truth content' of the lived experience of colonial violence. Central to Zimbler's arguments was his claim that a shift is needed in

the study of postcolonial texts, which so far has not placed enough emphasis on literary technique, referred to as 'craft.' In order to fully understand the ways in which truth may be reached though craft, Zimbler suggested that the critic must consider the totality of choices available to the artist: as well as the actual materials for writing with, this includes the words, subjects, forms, genres and techniques which she or he has access to at a given moment. Considered in this way, the postcolonial text is crafted out of the postcolonial conflict that is the moment of its production. Zimbler's approach also has applicability outside of the sphere of postcolonial studies: the relation of literary craft to the conditions of production has the potential to shed light on texts produced at any historical moment.

Zimbler ended his paper with a literary comparison of the novels of two writers: Alex La Guma and J.M. Coetzee. He argued that that La Guma's novels, for example *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and *The Stone-Country* (1967), are generally characterised by an excess of overly descriptive or writerly language. They are self-consciously literary to the extent that the reality or truth-content of the violence that they describe is eclipsed. The result Zimbler described as 'a failure to look squarely at the evils of apartheid.' Coetzee, conversely, was presented as an example of aesthetic success in the representation of conflict. Citing passages from *Dusklands* (1974), Zimbler demonstrated the ways in which Coetzee's novels react against those of writers like La Guma. In comparison, Coetzee's style is sparse, bare and brutal, allowing the truths of colonial violence visibility. This aspect of the paper revealed a further interesting intersection between literature and conflict: art, Zimbler made clear, is relational, with negative, conflictual relations between texts as important as positive influence.

While Coetzee had direct experience of South Africa under apartheid, our second plenary speaker, Dr Natasha Alden, dealt with the fictional representation of conflict by an author with no direct experience of that conflict. Her paper was titled 'Repression, revenants and illegible handwriting: sexuality, gender and perspective in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*.' Alden's research focuses on second generation world war fiction: novels, like *Regeneration* (1991), that centre on conflicts which, for both their authors and

readers, are historical. Alden looked closely at *Regeneration*, which centres on (and fictionalises) psychologist William Halse Rivers Rivers (1864-1922), who treated officers, including Siegfried Sassoon, for shell shock during World War One. Yet she also considered a number of the first-hand historical sources that Barker used to write her novel: accounts from Rivers' patients and samples of his handwriting for example.

By putting these primary sources into dialogue with the fictional text, Alden's paper raised a number of points about the relation between history and fiction in representing real life conflict. One important point that emerged from the talk was the way in which history and fiction intersect: history itself is always given a narrative structure by the historian that produces a record of historical events (White, 1978). Historical fiction such as Barker's, then, can be read as enacting a similar process, albeit in a much more explicitly fictional and literary way.

Other papers also considered the issue of representation, particularly of colonial and postcolonial conflicts. Sarah Chatterley, for example, examined George Orwell's representation of imperialism and the relation between the white man and the native in his early novel *Burmese Days* (1934), to argue that while *Burmese Days* 'is not a perfect anti-imperialist novel,' it effectively showcases the failings of imperialism, and influenced postcolonial writers Chinua Achebe and Edward Said. On the same panel, Jerome Wynter discussed strategies of resistance to discourses of imperialism and slavery in Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Poems before Congress* (1855) and *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851). As one commenter noted, both Chatterley and Wynter chose to focus on writing from within the culturally dominant group, rather than that of the oppressed minority or racial other. The question of how far one group is justified in representing the conflicts of another was dealt with particularly well by Wynter, who referred to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on representation and the role of the intellectual in allowing the oppressed subject a voice in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988).

It quickly became clear that the umbrella theme of 'literature and conflict' could in fact cover far more than the literary representation of violent conflicts external to the text. Many of the speakers suggested new ways of connecting and understanding both terms and the relationship between them. Papers explored the ways in which writers might utilise conflict to literary ends: how texts themselves can function as sites of battle and dispute, the role played by literature as an expression of inner or mental conflict, and the manifestations of wider religious, political and cultural conflicts in literary texts.

Both William Green and Elizabeth Cook considered the expression of wider religious and philosophical conflicts in literature of the seventeenth century. Green looked at religious conflict on the Jacobean stage, reading John Fletcher's tragicomedy, *The Island Princess* (1621) as an example of a more nuanced portrayal of Catholicism compared to its usual demonization in the drama of the period. Cook focussed on Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), to suggest that the text exhibits a conflict between two world-views: an idyllic prelapsarian vision of biocentrism, in which humans, animals and plants are seen as members of a wider biosphere, and a postlapsarian anthropocentrism, which places the human self at the centre of the universe.

Lucy Rowland also focussed on conflicting world-views in the early modern period. Her paper argued that the transformations of attitudes effected by scientific discovery in the early seventeenth century are realised psychologically in the mental conflicts of three of Shakespeare's tragic characters: King Lear, Macbeth and Timon of Athens. Speaking on the same panel, Molly Bridges also considered mental conflict. The act of writing poetry, for the early modern writers Bridges considered, was a way of warding off or alleviating madness. Literature for these writers, Bridges suggested, is a balm for conflict, a way of healing a conflicted self. Judith Roads too found a positive association between text and conflict, as made clear by her corpus-based inquiry into the ways in which early Quakers used conflict and dispute in their tracts and pamphlets. She concluded that it was frequently a campaigning tool by which they spread their message and recruited followers.

The final talk of the day, from the third of our plenary speakers, Dr Rebecca Yearling (Keele University), '"Getting caught up in the action:" Violent Spectacle and the Theatre Audience', continued the afternoon's focus on early modern literature. Plays like Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (c.1594), John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (c.1600) and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (c.1612), all of which contain an excessive amount of stage violence, are today performed more than they ever have been since the seventeenth century, and Yearling explored the responses that audiences might have to such violence in the early modern period and today. Most interesting was her discussion of the difficulty in controlling audience's responses, and the risk of unintended reactions to violence. To illustrate this she used the example of *Antonio's Revenge* , arguing that while the spectator desires the punishment of the evil duke Piero, the excess of the violence (Piero's young son is murdered in front of him) can leave an audience with a profound sense of unease.

Also important to Yearling's discussion was the immediacy of the theatre: an audience sees violence and conflict enacted before their eyes. In the world outside this would demand an active response, but in the world of the theatre the enforced passivity of spectatorship, Yearling maintained, makes the audience feel like either voyeurs or cowards. Yearling's arguments, therefore, raised an important point about fiction's potential to unsettle its audience or reader through its depiction of conflict or violence. We are not always able to control our responses to a piece of drama or a written text; perhaps the best literature on conflict always makes us uncomfortable in some sense, by revealing, to return to the topic of Zimbler's opening paper, the truths of that conflict. Conference organiser Emily Wingfield, representing EDACS, asked the question in her closing comments, would a conference on literature and harmony have inspired the same amount of discussion? Perhaps, but there is a sense in which all literature is in some way driven by conflict, be it the explicit representation of conflict, or simply on the level of narrative: conflict between the characters in a novel for example. The range of different ways in which papers at the conference explored and interpreted the relationship between the two terms certainly suggests so, revealing new insights on both literature and conflict, and literature ***as*** conflict.

Acknowledgments

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